

## Troops See President Usher in Christmas at the White House

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 5, 2003 —  
The countdown began with “5,” and four seconds later the 40-foot blue spruce burst forth in with red, white and green — Christmas at the White House had officially begun. President Bush and wife, Laura, greeted hundreds of children, their families and special guests on the White House lawn in chilly temperatures to watch the national Christmas tree-lighting ceremony Dec. 4. The annual event first began in 1923 with the nation’s 30th president, Calvin Coolidge. Several service members from Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom were among those assembled. Many came from nearby Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where they are recovering from injuries suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I know your families are glad to have you back,” the president told them. “They’re proud of your service, and so is our country. On behalf of all Americans, welcome home, and job well done. We also honor all of our fellow Americans serving far away from home during the holidays.” He then reminded the audience that for those serving in the military, separation from loved ones is especially difficult this time of year. “Our people in uniform can know that their families miss them and love them, that millions are praying for them, and that America is grateful for the men and women who serve and defend our country.”

Although the president’s arrival brought cheers, he may have been upstaged when the evening’s most important guest — Santa (this year, actor and former pro NFL player Merlin Olsen) — arrived.

Bush amused the crowd by comparing his clandestine Thanksgiving Day visit to troops in Iraq a week earlier to that of Santa on Christmas Eve. The president acknowledged that “it’s always good to see Santa.

Then he turned his attention to the jolly gent: “I know you’ve got a lot of commitments this time of year. We also know how Santa gets around: He travels in the dark of night, he arrives unannounced, and he’s gone before you know he was there.

And in a bull’s-eye reference to their respective journeys, the president said, “Santa, I can assure you, it’s a lot easier on a flying sled than it is on Air Force One.”

The president also told the story of why Christmas is celebrated, and he emphasized that the words of Christmas have spread a message across generations.

“The poor have heard words of hope, the proud have heard words of challenge, and the weak and the dying have heard words of assurance. And mankind has been given a message first delivered by angels on a shepherd’s field: ‘Fear not.’”

The president told the audience that “as we near Christmas in a time of war, these words bring comfort.” “We don’t know all of God’s ways, yet the Christmas story promises that God’s purpose is justice, and His plan is peace.”

This year’s event included performances by actress Shirley Jones, opera soprano Twyla Robinson, and the cast of the Broadway musical “Mamma Mia.” Country band Lonestar played several Christmas tunes, accompanied by the United States Coast Guard Band.



Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Doug Sample.

*Children from the VOENA (Voices of Eve’n Angels) choir perform for the audience at this year’s national tree-lighting ceremony at the White House Dec. 4. The international children’s choir is from Benicia, Calif.*